

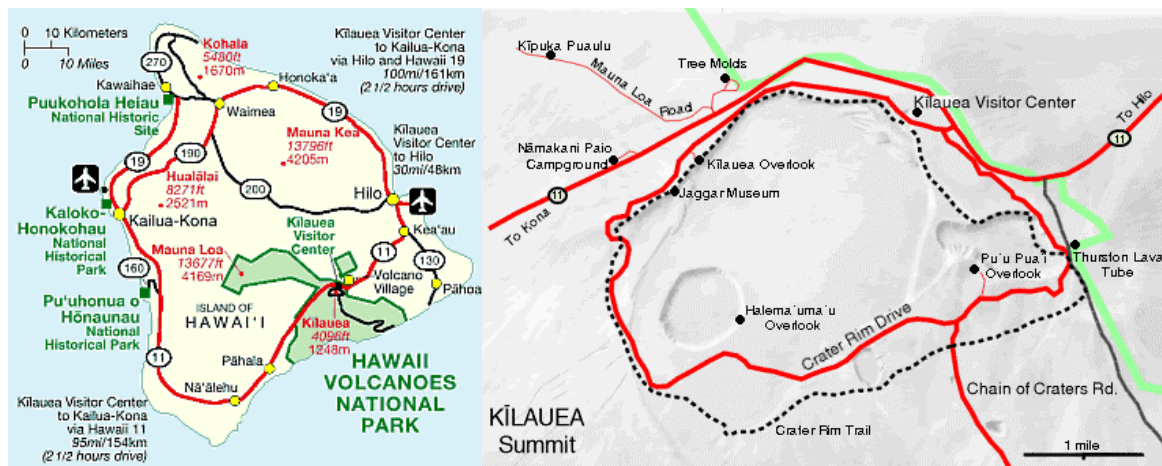
Report

Hawaii Volcanoes National Park

■ 1.0 Site Description

Hawaii Volcanoes National Park, located on the big island of Hawaii, between Hilo and Kona, was added to the NPS in 1916. The Park is comprised of two physically separate parcels of land, within which there are four overall activity areas. The activity areas are described below and shown in Figure 1. The activity areas are defined by their distance from Highway 11. Research since the 1970s has shown that cultural resources extend through all elevations from the coast to Mauna Loa and are not limited to the coastal areas as previously thought.

Figure 1.



- Mauna Loa is a mountainous volcanic peak which reaches an elevation of 13,677 feet. Mauna Loa is accessed by a road oriented northwest-southeast, located off of the main Highway 11. The road climbs to an elevation of 6,000 feet and provides parking for about seven passenger cars. The parking area is the point of departure for day hikers and multi-day summit hiking trips.
- Crater Rim Drive around Kilauea Crater is the core of the Park. The visitor center and Park headquarters are located on Crater Rim Drive, just a short distance off of Highway 11. In addition to the visitor center, there is an historic lodge, many hiking trails, and several crater-related sights for visitors to see. This area is the most impacted by the large numbers of visitors and their vehicles.

- Chain of Craters Road and Helenapali Road both provide access south of the Kilauea Crater down towards/along the coastline. Both provide access to a number of hiking trails, the few cultural resources that have not been covered by lava flows, and many of the environmental resources of the Park. Environmental resources include wilderness areas, whale-watching, and beach access.
- The Ala'a track is the physically separate parcel of land. Its main feature is the Fern Forest. It is not fully developed as a visitor attraction at this point. Without a more formal trail and boardwalk system to guide them, visitors could easily become lost in the ferns. It currently has difficult (unmarked) vehicular access and no parking facilities.

The Park reports that 2.5 million people pass through the Park on Highway 11 each year. The actual number of visitors to and through the Park itself are estimated at around 200,000 per year. The Park reports no monthly peaking characteristics, in terms of visitor numbers. In terms of the composition, more families visit during the summer. In the fall and in the spring, more couples visit, including newlyweds and retirees. By day of the week, visitation rises on Tuesdays and Thursdays when large cruise ships dock at Hilo.

■ 2.0 Existing ATS

Although a number of visitors arrive by bus, Hawaii Volcanoes National Park currently has no formal alternative transportation systems (ATS) in place. The description of the tour and other buses in this section provides the context for the discussion of ATS needs.

Historically, most tours came from the Hilo side of the island. The road system was less developed and the 30-mile drive from Hilo used to take much of the day. As such, most visitors used to reserve rooms at the on-site lodge.

Today, the highway has been improved and the tours come from both sides of the island. Because the drive time is much reduced compared to the historical travel time, visitors are able to come, visit, and return in a single day.

School buses from Hilo and Kona come to the Park during the weekdays. In groups, these tour buses off-load hundreds of people at a single time while also consuming the equivalent of several passenger auto parking spaces.

On Tuesdays and Thursdays, cruise ships dock in Hilo and put their passengers on tour buses to see Hawaii Volcanoes National Park. Because all meals are typically included in the cruise package, these visitors come through the Park quickly, driving around the Kilauea Crater. They tend to spend little money and return to the cruise ship immediately afterwards. The cruise ships usually arrive and depart in a single day.

Other tours are organized and arrive from the Kona (west) side of the island. Many of the visitors from the Kona side are Japanese and other Asian tourists. Because of the recent recessions experienced in Asian economies, there are fewer visitors than before. The visitors who do come, however, tend to have shorter, more structured visits than previously.

The Haleon Bus is a local form of public transportation which makes two loops around the island. It is focused on local commuters. It passes by the Park at 8:00 a.m. on the way from Hilo to Kona. It makes a return trip and stops at 3:00 p.m. From a schedule standpoint, it operates at times inconvenient to visitors.

Kona is developing its tourism heavily and is seeing more visitors who rent cars. Thus, Hawaii Volcanoes National Park has seen an increase in auto traffic in recent years from the Kona side of the island.

The typical visitor pattern, whether by bus or auto, creates a high demand for Park services and on Park resources between 10:00 a.m. and 3:00 p.m. Before 10:00 a.m. and after 3:00 p.m., the visitation is much lower. Because of the demand, particularly of buses, the Park reserves half of the parking area for buses during this period of the day.

■ 3.0 ATS Needs

The following needs were identified by the Park as means of improving the visitor experience while preserving and protecting the natural and cultural resources of the Park.

- Create a van or bus shuttle system along the Chain of Craters Road. The van or bus shuttle should have the capability (i.e., racks) of carrying multiple bicycles. This action will make the coastal area of the Park more available to visitors while preserving its natural character. Depending on the integration of this shuttle with other proposed services, it could operate from the headquarters area or it could operate as a transfer off of the Crater Rim Drive shuttle discussed below.
- Provide frequent mass transportation to/from Hilo on a regular basis. In the 1950s and 1960s, and again in the 1980s, open-air buses called “San Pans” operated between Hilo and the Park. The vehicles provided in the past and can provide access to the Park that limits the impact of personal autos, while also providing historically appropriate cultural context. This would also enhance the potential for economic development in Hilo.
- Establish a circulator system around Crater Rim Drive. With vehicles sized to demand, and potentially using alternate fuels, visitors could be distributed around the Park without the potential for congestion created by numerous autos making the same trip. This circulator would also be an essential counterpart to those visitors who would arrive by the mass transportation from Hilo, mentioned in the previous paragraph.
- Depending upon the cost and the demand for the yet-to-be-developed Ala’a Track area, a shuttle system from the headquarters to this area would eliminate the need to build a parking area. It could also serve as a means of metering the demand carefully to match tour-guide staffing. As previously mentioned, this fern forest may be most appropriately seen with the assistance of a guide so visitors do not get lost.

■ 4.0 Basis of ATS Needs

The shuttle services discussed above are viewed as a means of improving the visitor experience, preserving the natural, cultural, and historic resources, and potentially creating economic development opportunities with the town of Hilo. The shuttle services would enable the Park to reduce the presence of autos in the natural environment, an environment that is inherently unstable due to the lava flows. The shuttle services would also enable the Park to better manage the daily visitor peaks that occur between 10:00 a.m. and 3:00 p.m. The shuttles would allow the Park to develop new visitor areas without requiring large investments in fixed infrastructure such as roads and parking lots.

Additional considerations for ATS might include the following:

- Expand the Hilo-to-Park transportation to a Hilo-to-Kona system. This would build upon the existing system that is oriented towards commuters. It could also leverage the economic development activities already occurring in Kona. Further, there are a number of visitor attractions between and within the two major towns that could be served. Visitors to the island of Hawaii would better be able to experience the whole island if they allowed someone else to do the driving.
- These proposed services need not become “public” in the traditional sense. With creative contracting, these services could provide cost-sharing synergies for labor/operations, capital equipment, or both. These synergies could be beneficial to both the Park and to private concerns. One example would be to provide continuous work to tour bus operators who now have discontinuous (shift) work. They drive the big buses into the Park and must wait “on-call” while their visitors are touring. This is a potential source of labor for the Park.
- Another example would be for the tour companies to sell any “excess capacity” (i.e., extra seats) to Park visitors so the Park doesn’t have to purchase (as large) a fleet of its own vehicles. If the private company sells only 35 of its 50 seats in Hilo, but can sell the other 15 once it gets to the Park, both are better off. The tour company has a fuller bus and the Park can distribute visitors with a higher-level visitor experience.
- While there are many caveats to public-private partnerships, the degree to which visitor transportation systems can be made seamless, at least from visitor’s perspective, the services will be more readily used and the Park’s goals will be better achieved.

■ 5.0 Bibliography

Hawaii Volcanoes National Park. Internet site: <http://www.nps.gov/havo/>. Information printed November 4, 1999.

■ 6.0 Persons Interviewed

Jim Martin, Superintendent. Telephone Interview. November 5, 1999

Jim Martin, Superintendent. Telephone Interview. November 10, 1999